

Statement by Ambassador Theodore H. Kattouf
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to

House Committee on International Relations
Subcommittee on the Middle East & Central Asia
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I am pleased and honored to appear before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the House International Relations Committee. The views expressed are mine alone but are based on a 31-year career in the Foreign Service, including three separate tours of duty at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, culminating with my appointment as ambassador from the period September 2001 to late August 2003.

The Syrian regime puts survival and stability at the top of its priority list. Everything else is quite secondary. Syria's Ba'athist leadership espouses strongly Arab nationalism and as a corollary resistance to foreign pressure. Having few domestic or foreign policy accomplishments to point to in recent years, the regime is intent on projecting an image of steadfastness, both in terms of Arab nationalism and vital Syrian interests.

The Syrian leadership would prefer normal and improving relations with the United States and the West, but historically it has proven largely impervious to overt foreign pressures. Indeed, it often presents unilateral U.S. sanctions as a badge of honor to the larger Arab world.

At a time when many Arabs and Muslims view the U.S. as hostile to their interests, this strategy has some resonance. Public opinion polls cannot normally be conducted in Syria. Based on polling done in neighboring countries, however, it is reasonable to assume that most Syrians distrust U.S. motives and are repelled by the widespread bloodshed and sectarian killings taking place in Iraq.

In brief, many if not most Syrians would welcome a more open and democratic society and a leadership that, while nationalistic, was far less repressive. But my strong sense is that they want change to be brought about through their own efforts and managed in a way that prevents sectarian bloodletting and even civil war. Their fears of instability are well founded. Those from the Alawi sect dominate the upper echelons of the all-important security and intelligence services that keep the regime in power. Similarly, they hold key commands or other vital positions within the Syrian armed forces. Yet the Alawis comprise no more than 12 percent of the population of Syria. The Sunnis, who comprise about 74 percent of the populace, are the dominant religious strain. Ironically, the Alawis, a very heterodox offshoot of Shia Islam, were until well into the twentieth century the most downtrodden and impoverished religious sect within Syria.

As far as U.S. or U.N. sanctions are concerned, most Syrians undoubtedly believe that they will bear the consequences of their implementation while the elites go largely unscathed and unfazed by them. For this reason alone, any further sanctions should be to the greatest extent possible focused on malefactors rather than the Syrian population as a whole. They should also not hinder or harm people-to-people programs and relationships

Syrians also have long questioned the fairness of imposing economic or other sanctions on their country, since they widely believe that Israel's continued occupation of the Golan violates the terms of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and that Israel has been able to ignore other Security Council resolutions with impunity.

According to accounts available to me, most Syrians accept their government's contention that the Lebanese by and large did not show the proper gratitude and respect for the perceived "sacrifices" Syria made "on their behalf" for almost 30 years. Furthermore, they were angered by attacks on and expulsions of Syrian workers in the wake of their army's withdrawal and by continuing anti-Syrian sentiments publicly expressed in some quarters of Lebanon.

Two overriding facts need to be kept in mind in trying to change the entrenched policies and behaviors of Syrian leaders. First, unilateral U.S. sanctions and pressures have limited utility. By far, the most effective measures directed at changing Syrian policy during President Bush's term in office has been the skillful diplomacy that led to passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for Syria's withdrawal at the time when its regime engineered a three-year extension of President Lahoud's expiring term. Following the Hariri assassination, the U.S., working with France, the Security Council, the European Union, and key Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, managed to isolate Syria and leave it with no realistic option other than to withdraw its forces. In other words, a broad, multilateral approach, clearly targeted and grounded both in international law and consensus, offers the best chance of transforming Syria's behavior.

The second fact is that during most of the 43 years that the Ba'ath Party has ruled Syria, one or another foreign benefactor has been necessary to keep its largely statist economy afloat. Finally, at the beginning of this century, and in contravention of UNSC resolutions, Syria received cheap oil from Iraq which it was able to sell at a premium on the world market. As a result of these sales, it is likely that Syria still has considerable financial reserves to draw upon, but like virtually every other Arab country it must create jobs and other opportunities for a burgeoning youth population. It is hard to imagine a benefactor with both the intent and resources to bolster Syria's fragile economy.

If multilateral sanctions are the sine qua non for bringing meaningful pressure to bear on the regime and the country's finances are its Achilles heel, the question remains as to what is the triggering event. Personally I do not believe that it will be possible to get a strong enough consensus for such measures absent a damning report from U.N. Special Investigator Serge Bramertz. If his report does not present conclusive proof of high-level Syrian complicity in the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and others, then Syria's leaders are likely to shrug it off. It is questionable if a U.N. Security Council resolution

calling on Syria to establish formal diplomatic ties with Lebanon and to agree to jointly demarcate their border is sufficient to galvanize the international community given the number of similar disputes around the world.

Meanwhile, Syrian leaders are not waiting passively for further U.S.-led actions to harm its economy and politically isolate it. As U.S. oil companies divest themselves of production and exploration rights in Syria, Chinese, Russian and other companies are being given the opportunity to replace them. Syria is also attracting a modest amount of Gulf investment, particularly in real estate and tourism development. Longstanding ties with Iran and Hezbollah are being tended to assiduously as are those with Hamas.

Pro-reform forces in Lebanon have despaired at the impunity with which leading journalists critical of Syria have been killed. The country's leaders once again appear gridlocked, unable to deliver economic growth, let alone pay down the country's crushing debts. Increasingly the best educated are voting with one-way airline tickets.

My sense is that the million or so Lebanese who laudably turned out on March 14, 2005, to urge a pull-out of Syrian forces and reform of Lebanon's political system may be losing heart. We in the West had a tendency to overlook the half a million or more disciplined demonstrators who turned out on March 8 and all that they represent. They came at the behest of Hezbollah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah to thank Syria and to indicate that a large swath of Lebanon's Shia community – a plurality in the country – believe their lot had improved because of close cooperation with Syria, and to signal that they would not countenance changes that would lead to the disarming of Hezbollah or a diminution of its influence. Subsequent events in Iraq have only exacerbated tensions between the Sunni and Shia communities. The traditional fractiousness of Lebanon's political class can also claim its share of blame for the country's lack of progress. Too often in Lebanon selfish motives and ambitions are put far ahead of the nation's interests. After all, Syria could not have so easily exercised the influence it did in Lebanon without the active complicity of many of the country's elites.